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Tony Leisner

Dawson Information Services Group

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Out of Africa

by **Tony Leisner** (Dawson Information Services Group)
<71023.3440@compuserve.com>



Thoughts About an African Visit

Ah, the romance of travel to exotic places and for some reason, Africa in particular. Visions of lions and wildlife and *National Geographic* dance through our heads as we contemplate visiting this incredible land. For those of us who are addicted to travel and who have made several trips to Africa this vast continent continues to amaze and confuse us. In some ways it is unchanged from centuries of tradition and culture and in so many other aspects it is changing too rapidly.

This was my third visit to Africa. I have never just flown in, gone out in a striped mini bus and stuck my head out of the roof to take pictures of animals in a fenced compound. This trip was no exception as it was a honeymoon holiday with Patti and the first time for northwest Africa. We had no set itinerary and had hoped to reach Timbuktu sometime during the journey. For those people who don't know where Timbuktu is located I don't want you to feel alone. American's geographic grasp of Africa is pretty weak and most can't name more than a few countries much less tell anyone where they actually are located. Timbuktu is on the Niger river in Mali located at the southern edge of the Sahara. The problem with getting there is twofold. No one seems to know when the river boats run that ply the Niger and the government of Mali doesn't know if their own national airline is actually flying anymore. Add to that disease, crime and unbelievable filth and you might understand why we opted not to attempt the river trip for our honeymoon. A change of plans and destinations offered us the opportunity to spend more time looking at Senegal and meeting people who shared insights about Africa. We adjusted our plans to allow a week in Dakar and then two weeks in Namibia.

I would love to be writing about the libraries and the great advances that literacy has achieved but we saw nothing worth writing about and there is so much to be done to solve basic, day-to-day life support that libraries simply weren't very important. What was obvious was the ease with which we live in America and how little we understand about the plight of those who want to live here and cannot. We didn't meet any black Africans who didn't offer to lend us a child or two to bring back to America and educate. These offers became our entree into the racial aspects of Africa because we asked why they wanted their children to be taken in by white strangers and whisked off to America. Their answers were short and to the point. White people are more humane in their treatment of black Africans than are black people. They cite Alex Haley and *Roots* where they point out that Haley never put a penny back into the village he

relied upon for his fortune. They further point out the volunteers from all the aid and support agencies where the vast majority of workers are white. Now, before you label me a racist, remember I am just quoting the many people we met and got to know who live in these black ruled countries. Their heroes are Bill Clinton and JFK. A woman who worked as a clerk in a hotel in Dakar was so proud of herself for sending a fax to Bill Clinton to congratulate him on his victory that she was telling all the guests. They resent their own black leaders who pocket the financial aid sent by our government and continue to oppress the populace of the very country they are supposed to be helping with this money. They resent the corruption of police who can take you to the markets and show you how to buy back the things that were stolen from you right on the streets in broad daylight. What they want to do is live in America and be known as American black people. Their greatest resentment is for the people who call themselves African Americans and have never been to their villages, never sent help, don't volunteer to work in Africa, have no friends in Africa and for the most part know no more about Africa than the average white person on the street. They simply don't understand how a black American taxi driver can enjoy a better standard of living than 95% of Africans and then call himself an African American. They just don't identify with citizens of a country where people won't be left to die or starve on the streets if they have no money and where people have more money for having babies rather than less. They don't comprehend a place where anyone can go to school and get a job if they want one. Our friend Ngor, who speaks five languages and hustles as hard as anyone I have ever met, lives on about \$200.00 a month. Half of that goes for rent and he gets by, with his wife and three kids, on the rest. What he wants is for his daughter to be able to come to America, go to school, live a better life than he could ever provide for her and for her to become an American, not an African American.

As we watch the events unfold in Rwanda and east central Africa, where I spent a month in 1985, it isn't possible for most of to understand what life in Africa is really like. To even think that sending 5000 American troops into a land where French and Swahili are the only languages and where all of a family's possessions can be carried on their backs will make any difference is simply folly. Even South Africa, which is being held up as a model for the world, has such severe problems that even a great man like Mandela won't solve them in his lifetime. We weren't allowed to leave the Holiday Inn in downtown Johannesburg without an armed police escort provided as a free

service by the hotel. So rather than walk around with an armed escort we stayed in the hotel and watched Oprah, South Africa's most popular show now that TV censorship has taken over the content people are allowed to view. And Pretoria has become the car-jacking capitol of the world in just four short years. This is not what the media wants to portray but it is the reality. All the companies that closed down and left during the sanction period took too many jobs with them and they have not been replaced. The expectations are high, the promises even higher and the crime is overwhelming. Unemployment is staggering, inflation is high and money is short. Political issues are discussed in terms of tribes and not parties just as in Rwanda. In Zaire you can't be a citizen if you aren't black. In fact, in each of the 55 countries in Africa, there are two few resources and too many people for there to be any easy solutions.

As we view Somalia, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Zaire and try to understand why we feel so helpless perhaps it is useful to remember that it is not possible to believe that a family that needs food today will easily see that a library will help them get food tomorrow. They won't comprehend why a government, ours, can prop up their corrupt leaders and pump money into their pockets and at the same time claim to be providing humanitarian aid with troops. The military aren't respected in Zaire, they are feared just as the death squads were in South Africa. The starving populace sees the aid workers arrive in brand new \$80,000.00 land rovers and leave for the posh hotels so it is no wonder the people become somewhat cynical. Granted there are many good agencies that live with the people and work side by side such as the Peace Corps and CARE. But there aren't enough of them to counter the poor policies of Washington and the apathy of most who claim ties to Africa.

We cannot continue to view Africa through western eyes and think that western solutions are going to solve the problems. One black librarian quickly told me I was a racist because I said that the Zulu warriors in South Africa would take up their spears and shields to protest their treatment. When the Zulu tribesmen did exactly that, she at least conceded that maybe she really didn't know much about Africa and wasn't an African American after all. Perhaps all of this has less to do with race than we have all thought. Maybe it is about culture and values and upbringing and history and family ties. By the way, speaking of family ties, we have "adopted" Ngor and his family and will be providing them with things and support from America. Perhaps we can even help his daughter to realize their dream of her becoming a black American. 🌿